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RUEHDK/AMEMBASSY DAKAR 0247
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE 0661
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD 4368
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL 2660
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU 0681
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 1318
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C O N F I D E N T I A L TASHKENT 000819

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/14/2018
TAGS: PHUM KPAO PGOV PREL UZ
SUBJECT: UZBEKISTAN: HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST CHARGED IN
KARAKALPAKSTAN

REF: TASHKENT 706

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: On July 13, the Voice of Freedom website reported that human rights activist and opposition party member Azam Turgunov was detained by police in the town of Mangit in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic on July 11. According to Human Rights Watch director Igor Vorontsov, Turgunov was formally charged on July 13 with extortion, which carries a maximum penalty of five to ten years' imprisonment. Turgunov was reportedly arrested after receiving payment for representing a family in a non-political case, but Vorontsov speculated that Turgunov might have been setup by Karakalpak authorities who had grown increasingly irritated by his human rights activities in the region. Separately, a New York Times reporter contacted the Ambassador over her concern that Salijon Abdurahmanov, a former Radio Free Europe reporter who was detained in Karakalpakstan on drug charges on June 7 (reftel), was targeted by local authorities because he assisted her trip to Karakalpakstan earlier this year. In addition, Agrarian party leader Marat Zahidov speculated that Abdurahmanov was targeted because of his opposition activities. We will continue to follow both cases closely and request additional information from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. End summary.

HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST ARRESTED IN KARAKALPAKSTAN

¶2. (U) On July 13, the Voice of Freedom website reported that Azam Turgunov, the director of the Mazlum human rights organization and a member of the Erk opposition party Central Committee, was detained by police in the town of Mangit in the Karakalpakstan Autonomous Republic on July 11. The website reported that Turgunov, a lawyer, was visiting Karakalpakstan, in Northwestern Uzbekistan, to take part in two unspecified trials. He was reportedly accused of extortion and is being held at a pre-trial detention facility operated by the local Karakalpakstan branch of the Ministry

of Internal Affairs.

HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH REPORTS TURGUNOV FORMALLY CHARGED

¶3. (C) On July 14, poloff discussed Turgunov's detention with Human Rights Watch Director Igor Vorontsov, who first reported Turgunov's arrest in an email on July 12. Vorontsov reported that Turgunov was formally charged by a judge in Karakalpakstan on July 13 with extortion (Article 165 part 2) under Uzbekistan's Criminal Code, which carries a maximum penalty of five to ten years' imprisonment. Vorontsov said that Turgunov's colleague Karabayev might defend him in court, though no trial date has yet been set.

¶4. (C) Prior to his arrest, Turgunov was reportedly hired as a lawyer by a man named "Hamray" (last name unknown) to represent his family in a property dispute, which according to Vorontsov, was completely non-political in nature. On the evening of July 11, Turgunov allegedly received payment for his services from Hamray in Mangit, and both of them were promptly arrested by police (Hamray's fate is unknown). Vorontsov did not know the details of the second trial on which Turgunov was reportedly working. Vorontsov confirmed Turgunov's detention with his son, Murat, and several of his colleagues.

TURGUNOV'S ARREST A SET-UP?

¶5. (C) Vorontsov speculated that Turgunov's arrest might have been a setup and the result of a deliberate provocation by Karakalpak authorities. He noted that Turgunov had spent a significant amount of time in Karakalpakstan recently investigating rule of law and corruption cases and might have raised the ire of local prosecutors and law enforcement officials (Comment: Along with Andijon province, Karakalpakstan remains one of the most difficult regions of the country in which to operate for independent activists. End comment.)

TURGUNOV NOT INVOLVED IN FORMER RFE REPORTER'S CASE

¶6. (C) Vorontsov confirmed that Turgunov was not involved in the case of former Radio Free Liberty reporter Salijon Abdurahmanov, who was detained in Nukus, the capital of Karakalpakstan, on drug charges on June 7 (reftel). Vorontsov said that there had been some talk of Turgunov maybe representing Abdurahmanov, but that his family rejected the idea. Vorontsov said that Abdurahmanov's brother Bakhrom was still acting as his lawyer, and he had no additional information about the case.

ABDURAHMONOV ARRESTED AFTER NYT REPORTER'S VISIT

¶7. (C) After Abdurahmanov's arrest, the Ambassador was contacted by New York Times reporter Sabrina Tavernise, who had traveled to Uzbekistan on a tourist visa this spring and later published three articles on the country, including one on the three-year anniversary of the Andijon events and another on environmental destruction in Karakalpakstan as a result of the country's cotton production methods. Abdurahmanov helped arrange meetings for Tavernise and accompanied the reporter on her travels through Karakalpakstan. Tavernise expressed concern to the Ambassador that Abdurahmanov might have subsequently been arrested by authorities as a result (Comment: While this is certainly plausible, poloff has spoken with several other activists who assisted Tavernise during her trip, and none of them suffered any clear retaliation. Tavernise's article on Karakalpakstan also appeared on June 15, after Abdurahmanov's arrest. End comment.)

ABDURAHMONOV ACTIVE MEMBER OF AGRARIAN OPPOSITION PARTY

¶ 8. (C) On June 20, poloff met with Agrarian opposition party leader Marat Zahidov, who noted that Abdurahmanov was the Agrarian's party main representative in Karakalpakstan and expressed concern that Abdurahmanov might have been targeted by local authorities because of his opposition political activities. Abdurahmanov has previously written articles on farmers' rights, corruption, and human rights issues in Karakalpakstan and helped organize several seminars in Nukus on the use of child labor during the cotton harvest. According to Zahidov, Abdurahmanov has frequently been harassed by local authorities. Zahidov shared with poloff several pictures of Abdurahmanov with other Agrarian party activists as well as a complaint letter on Abdurahmanov's behalf that Zahidov sent to Internal Affairs Minister Bahodir Malubov.

¶ 9. (C) Zahidov also reported that after Abdurahmanov was detained on drug charges, authorities searched his home and found a copy of a banned book by Erk party leader Muhammad Solih, which Zahidov had given to Abdurahmanov after one of his trips to see Solih in Sweden (the book was in English, which Abdurahmanov reportedly does not read). Zahidov was concerned that Abdurahmanov might also be charged with possessing the illegal book, or that authorities would pursue the drug charges against him with renewed vigor after

"discovering" the book at his home.

¶ 10. (C) Zahidov speculated that Abdurahmanov was not arrested on orders from Tashkent, but on the initiative of local authorities, whom he believed are eager to please superiors in Tashkent by demonstrating that they are clamping down on "extremists" or other destabilizing elements. Zahidov believed that Abdurahmanov's opposition and journalist activities made him an easy target for local authorities.

COMMENT

¶ 11. (C) The exact details surrounding Turgunov's arrest remain murky, and we will continue to follow the case closely and ask for clarification from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Turgunov is a prominent human rights activist in Uzbekistan and has previously met with poloff. While we agree with Vorontsov that Turgunov might have been arrested because of his human rights activities in Karakalpakstan, it remains possible that he was targeted by authorities because of his role in some type of property dispute involving Hamray's family. If Turgunov is in need of further legal assistance, we also will file a Global Human Rights Defender's Fund application on his behalf. In addition, we will continue to follow Abdurahmanov's case closely. We agree with Zahidov that it is most likely that both men were arrested on the initiative of local authorities in Karakalpakstan, rather than on direct orders from Tashkent.

NORLAND